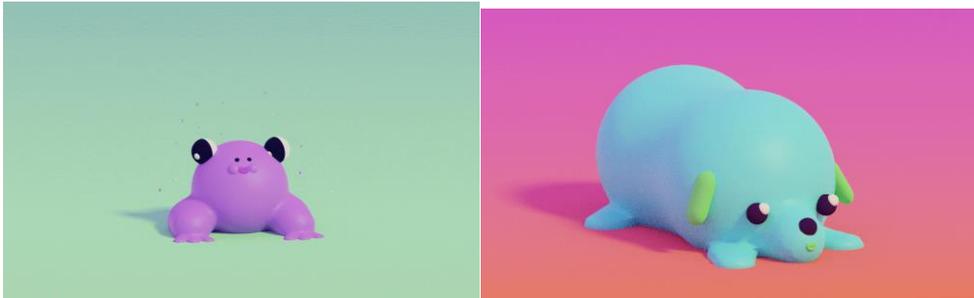


M

OneZero

Looking at Cute Animals Online Is Literally Good for Your Brain

Angela Lashbrook
30 October 2019



There’s no end to the devastating news in my social media feeds. As I write this, a beloved publication is under assault by its owners, fires are laying waste to my home state, and our country’s politics continue to descend into terrifying absurdity. On the best days, I can walk away from my computer and leave all the misery behind, at least for a little while. But on others, when I’m glued to my computer for work, I turn to Instagram, where I have created a haven of adorable, hilarious pets that instantly calm me down.

It might seem like a frivolous response, but it’s actually not. Research shows that looking at cute things, whether it’s babies, animals, or even inanimate objects, can ease stress, heighten productivity, and even improve marriages.

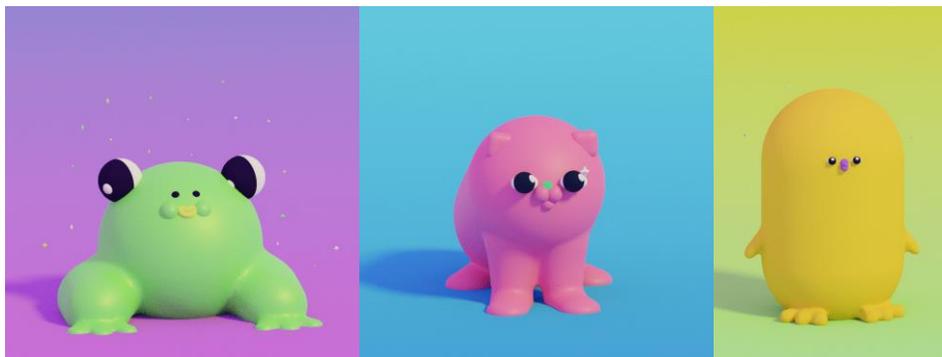
Our attraction to cute animals generally can be explained by “baby schema,” a concept proposed by the Austrian ethologist (or studier of animal behavior) Konrad Lorenz. The baby schema theory posits that humans evolved to be drawn towards creatures with big heads, large eyes near the center of the face, chubby cheeks, and a big forehead because they had to care for babies. The pleasure early humans derived from looking at babies made them more likely to care for and protect them, and we still have this tendency today. Our attraction to the characteristics of babies can be extended to include animals — in particular baby animals, who, like human babies, often have big heads and features.

Jessica Gall Myrick, an associate professor of media studies at Penn State University who has studied how internet animals affect our emotions, says that looking at adorable animals results in feelings of warmth, similar to how we might feel when we see a human baby.

“Viewing images or videos of cute creatures likely elicits similar feelings and motivations in people as our brains are not great at differentiating between mediated and real-life situations,”

she says. “In my study of responses to cat videos, many of which likely contain cute content, people reported experiencing greater positive emotions and more energy after viewing them than before, alongside a corresponding decrease in negative feelings.”

Myrick’s 2015 study is one of only a handful that have investigated how people respond to footage of cute animals. It asked 7,000 people how they felt before and after viewing cat pictures or videos online, finding not only that looking at cat photos improved participants’ moods but also that the more they looked at those images, the greater the effect. The study speculated that as people associated the pictures with positive feelings, they learned to expect those positive feelings from the same activity in the future, compounding the impact. However, the study points out that people who were already passionate about animals may have self-selected to participate in the study, skewing the results. Furthermore, 88% of them were women, who generally tend to respond more positively to cute things than men, so it’s hard to extrapolate the findings more broadly. One 2018 study found that women’s appetite for meat decreased more than men’s after all participants looked at the same images of cute farm animals. One explanation may be that women tend to assume the cultural role of caregivers and are more likely to be affected by baby schema as a result.



Hiroshi Nittono is the director of the cognitive psychophysiology laboratory at Osaka University in Japan and has run several studies on *kawaii*, which roughly translates to “cute” in English. The happy-making effect of looking at *kawaii* images, he says, is twofold: it distracts us from “boring or stressful” life situations, and it “reminds us of warm, tender feelings, which most of us are short of.” Both are equally important: “For example, porn websites meet the first condition, but not the second condition,” he explains. “Reading or watching heart-warming stories gives us tender feelings, but it may take some time. Therefore, watching a cute animal image or video is a good and convenient way of recalling our potential social connectedness.”

Looking at pictures of animals can even be good for your relationship. A 2017 study found that when couples look at pictures of cute animals together, they identify the positive feelings elicited by the animals with their partner. The researchers, who were contracted to do the study by the Department of Defense to help couples separated by deployment, were surprised the experiment worked as well as it did.

While I support the proliferation of animal content on all social media platforms (r/aww is a treasure trove of delight), I find that saving Instagram almost exclusively for “cute follows” allows me to have a safe haven online where I can retreat when I’m down. And when much of

the other, nonanimal content that lives there makes users feel terrible — 2017 research found Instagram to be the most emotionally damaging of all the social platforms, in part due to the highly curated way people present themselves there — it stands to reason that transforming it into a corner of baby schema will only improve the place. Further, because it offers little in the way of career advancement, news education, and family connection and conversation for most people, there's little to lose if Instagram users flood their feeds with images of corgis and mute or unfollow the supposedly perfect friends and influencers who are making viewers feel bad.

[Darth](#), a Twitter user who presents as an anthropomorphized red panda and spends his days retweeting cute animals, clearly feels his efforts make a difference.

“Dogs are all that is good on the internet,” he says. “The joy of people on Twitter sharing their pups, I think, cannot be matched. There are so many issues on Twitter people disagree on, but the people who show me their pups are my Twitter people.”

I'm personally partial to Shiba Inus, which is why I follow [@minapple](#), [@hinaosora](#), and [@tommyrts](#) among probably at least ten other Shiba accounts.

Cat fans may find themselves drawn to the big blue eyes of [@coopertheimmie](#), [@therealpercypersian](#)'s philosophical missives, or Amaro and Morty's stunning cocktail modeling at [@coqtale](#).

And for those who like a good story with their adorable animals, I can't recommend [@vincentjmusi](#) enough — he's a former *National Geographic* photographer who now focuses his work on expressive portraits of pets.

So unfollow all those beautiful, rich human influencers. Mute your friends whose constant partying is making you feel left out or lonely. Replace them with a good pet (or 20) — your brain will be glad you did.

Written by Angela Lashbrook: I write about things that I like and things that I don't, mainly in the health and tech sphere. Brooklyn, NY.